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ABSTRACT

The teaching of politeness formulas and their spontaneous use by young children were investigated. The use of such formulas as greetings and thanks was studied in terms of the cultural features that may interact with the learning of such formulas and the analyses children make concerning the situations in which they are used. Conversations were taped at 3-week intervals over the course of 14 months at the homes of three Mexican families living in California. At the start of taping, the children were 20 to 26 months old. Each taping session attempted to capture 4 hours of everyday interactions. It was observed that the parents prompted the use of politeness formulas. All three of the children had begun using formulas spontaneously by the first taping session. The adults placed a great deal of emphasis on the acquisition of these formulas and rarely missed an opportunity to model their use. Although only Spanish was spoken in the home, politeness formulas were modeled in both English and Spanish. The errors that the children made in the use of politeness formulas indicated that they were trying to determine the underlying structure of such forms. (RW)

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Understanding Components of a Situation: Spontaneous Use of Politeness Routines by Mexicano Two-Year-Olds

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The focus of this paper is the interrelationship between the teaching of politeness formulas and their spontaneous use by young children. The aspect of politeness to be considered includes the use of ritualized personal exchanges, such as greetings and thanks. Such ritualized formulas are a universal phenomenon of human languages and extremely important in the regulation of social interaction and organization (Ferguson, 1976; Goffman, 1971). Failure to follow the rules governing their use can have socially disruptive consequences (Ervin-Tripp, 1969; Hymes, 1973). Certainly, failure to respond to greetings or to thank someone for a gift in Western culture is seen as socially inappropriate behavior (Apte, 1974).

Because such routines are so important in the regulation of adult interactions, learning to use them is an important component of the development of communicative competence. Using language for social purposes is part of becoming a member of a social group. Understanding how children learn to use such formulas can reflect their knowledge about social settings and their understanding of the rules governing social interaction. In order to use politeness routines appropriately, children have to learn to say the right thing at the right time--which means learning what the "right time" is. Since the use of politeness formulas is governed by situational constraints, focusing on children's use of such routines can indicate how they interpret the situations that involve linguistic interaction.

While a variety of researchers have discussed various aspects of routine exchanges in adult language (e.g., Apte, 1974; Ferguson, 1976; Firth, 1972; Goody, 1972), how and when children acquire them has been, for the most part, only cursorily discussed in the child language literature. Occasional mention has been made of the early acquisition of one or another social routine--usually bye-bye or thank-you (e.g., Bruner, 1975; Ferrier, 1978)--but only Gleason and Weintraub (1975; 1976a&b) have discussed them in any depth as part of the young child's growing communicative competence.

Three interesting points stand out in their research. First, the one routine that seems to be used earliest by children is bye-bye. They have suggested that bye-bye may be acquired early because it is appropriate to the cognitive-developmental level of preverbal infants "who may see it as an instrumental act related to their own feelings of omnipotence" (Gleason and Weintraub, 1976b:201). More likely, however, is that children learn the bye-bye routine first because it is the most frequently modeled and the simplest to produce. Bye-bye is modeled for prelinguistic infants because they can

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respond nonverbally (with hand-waving) while other routines may be modeled for children only once they can talk.

The second point is that adults seem to treat routines differently from other linguistic behaviors. In middle-class, American communities, routines stand out as the one aspect of language that adults explicitly teach. That is, politeness routines are specially marked, usually with Say (e.g., Say please) or What do you say?. Unlike other lexical items, they are not embedded in a variety of sentence frames (e.g., See the doggie, That's a doggie, The doggie's eating his dinner; Gleason and Weintraub, 1976b:131). Adults tell children when to use politeness formulas, but do not provide any explanatory discussion regarding their use.

Since the acquisition of politeness formulas is so closely tied to direct teaching by adults, the implication is that when children begin learning them and how fast they do so will differ across cultural groups, depending on the emphasis placed on learning them (Bowerman, 1980). On a related level, there is certainly evidence that children vary as to when they begin to use polite forms of requests, depending on the importance of mitigating requests within their culture (e.g., Hollos and Beeman, 1978). Bates (1976) has also pointed out that Italian children may learn politeness formulas late because Italian parents are relatively tolerant of their children's failures to say please and thank-you. The sociocultural factors surrounding the use and importance of such formulas needs to be further investigated.

The final point to be made concerning the Gleason and Weintraub studies involves their claim that the acquisition of routines proceeds in the opposite direction from much of the rest of language-learning. The general pattern in language development is that competence precedes performance. Language is mapped onto some prior cognitive structure. Yet, according to Gleason and Weintraub, because adults mark the routines with devices like Say thank-you and insist that the children perform, performance precedes competence in the acquisition of politeness routines. Only later will children come to understand why they are saying what the adult has directed them to say.

What has been overlooked in their studies, however, is the process by which children begin to use such routines outside the context of adult prompts. While performance in situations where the adult says Say thank-you does not require competence, saying thank-you spontandously does. The child may not have to understand what it means to say thank-you or why one says it, but s/he does need to know something about when one says thank-you. The competence involved is not understanding the meaning of a lexical item, but understanding the components of a situation that require the speaker to utter a particular word or phrase. While adult prompting may make

politeness routines particularly salient so that children learn them, adults only implicitly indicate when to use them. To use them spontaneously, children still need to use their own analytic systems to determine a set of rules governing the use of politeness formulas within interaction.

Thus, the purpose of this study was to document both the elicited and spontaneous use of ritual exchanges & politeness formulas, with the intent to answer two questions: (1) What are the culturally specific features that may interact with the learning of such social features of language? and (2) What analyses do children make concerning the situations in which such formulas are used? The formulas to be discussed include not only hi, bye, please, and thank-you, but also other routines for greeting and thanking (e.g., Spanish and English versions of good evening, may you go well, may God reward you for it, how are you?, etc.), as well as sorry, bless you, and excuse me.

The data base from which these observations were drawn consisted of taped conversations recorded in three Mexicano homes. All of the parents were relatively recent immigrants from Mexico, living in California, and still thought of themselves as Mexicanos--Mexicans. With the exception of a few scattered lexical items, they all spoke Spanish exclusively in the homes. All of the families were lower, working-class; the fathers worked in a foundry, a bread factory, and a chemical plant. The three children who were the focus of the study--Pepito, Gabriela, and Nancy--were 20 to 26 months old when taping began. They were all only children when the study began, but each had a sister born during the course of taping. Recordings were made at three-week intervals for nine to fourteen months. Each taping session consisted of two separate two-hour sessions, yielding a total of four hours of recording every three weeks. Attempts were made to tape across the range of everyday interactions that each child participated in.

Like the parents in the Gleason and Weintraub studies, the adults in this study frequently prompted the use of politeness formulas with the directive Díle (Say to him/her). The children were taught a number of things to say when receiving an object: thank-you and gracías as well as Diós te lo pague (May God pay you for it). They were also taught a number of different formulas for greetings and leave-takings: hi, bye, and adiós as well as ¿cómo estás? (how are you?), que te vayas bién (May you go well), salúdale a tu mamá (say hello to your mother), etc. The children were also told to answer a summons with the polite response mande usted (literally, "you command," using the formal form of you) and Nancy was given the appropriate lines to say when answering the telephone. They were also told to say excuse me and sorry and to make offers of food to their guests.

Although they did not use all of the formulas in all "required"

contexts even by the end of taping, all three children had begun using them spontaneously by the first taping session. They rarely failed to greet the Experimenter when she arrived and always said bye-bye (and sometimes adiós) unless they were crying. Gabriela first used salud (bless you) and 'scuse me at 28 months and por favor (piease) and gracías (thank-you) at 30 months. Pepito used gracías and salud at 32 months and cochino (rudeness) instead of excuse me after he burped. Nancy's use of politeness formulas was most advanced. Besides using hi and bye at 20 months, she also answered the phone saying alo and ¿cómo estás? (how are you?). She began responding bién (fine) in that exchange at 23 months and produced gracías at 21 months and por favor and sorry at 26 months. At 29 months, her repertoire of such formulas expanded widely to include--among others--gracías pa' venir (thanks for coming), saludas a tu mamá (say hello to your mother), que te vayas bien (may you go well) --and she replaced her response, ¿qué? (what?), to a summons with the more polite form mande usted. Thus, by approximately 2-1/2 and certainly by age three, all of the children had a number of politeness formulas in their repertoires and used them frequently and spontaneously.

Since there has been so little documentation of the point at which children begin to use such forms spontaneously, it is difficult to be certain that these children were learning such forms early. Yet certainly, the spontaneous use of so many different politeness formulas seems earlier than has generally been reported (Bates, 1976; Gleason and Weintraub, 1976a). For example, Gleason and Weintraub (1976a) reported that only 21% of children under six years of age said thank-you and 26% said goodbye in their Halloween study.

A number of factors seemed to contribute to the early use of these formulas. First, not only did the adults model their use in utterances equivalent to Say please--Díle por favor--but they placed a great deal of emphasis on their acquisition and rarely let an opportunity pass without modeling their use. The parents referred to politeness routines as an important aspect of linguistic socialization. Having children who were malcriados (poorly raised) reflected on them and their ability to theach their children. The fact that, with the exception of numbers, politeness routines were the only lexical items modeled in English as well as Spanish further reflected their importance for the adults in the study. Children had to know how to speak politely in English as well as Spanish contexts because the adults expected that eventually their children would find themselves in situations where knowing how to say gracías or por favor would not be sufficient. Thus, they were taught to say thank-you and please, too. Even when they had already uttered the appropriate formula in Spanish, they were occasionally told to repeat the English form (e.g., Díle please, "Say please") or asked ¿Y en inglés? (And in English?

Failures to use the appropriate formulas were marked with other comments by the adults as well. In particular, the children were simply told to Salúdales, "greet them." If they failed to do so, both parents and visitors reacted with gasps of amazement and comments such as ¿No me vas a saludar?, "aren't you going to greet me?," ¡Mira, no saludó!, "look, she didn't greet," and ¡Ay, malcriada!, "ay, poorly-raised one." One little boy of 35 months was ostracized until he finally went and greeted his grandmother. By 29 months, Nancy's own comments refelcted her parents' statements about the importance of greeting. When her friend Pablito visited while visitors were present and failed to go into the kitchen to greet them, she would run in and announce Ay, Mami, no saludó Pablito, "Ay, Mami, Pablito didn't greet." If an adult came to visit and overlooked her while greeting the adults in the family, she would accuse him/her with ¡No me saludastes!, "you didn't greet me."

Another factor that may have contributed to the early acquisition of so many different routines for greeting and thanking was that the children had so many opportunities to be exposed to instruction because of the patterns of interaction within their homes. They had frequent, almost daily, contacts with a wide array of individuals. Neighbors and kin group members were constantly going in and out of the home and those comings and goings were highly marked. In addition, the children were treated as if they, too, were a host or hostess when guests were visiting. A gift to the family or to a younger sibling was considered a gift to the child as well and, thus, s/he was expected to say thank-you, too. Similarly, children were expected to offer their guests food--to assist in seeing to their comfort.

Finally, children were routinely told what to say in a variety of other contexts as well. Using the form Díle, "say to him/her," children were instructed to make offers, respond to questions, accompany their acts with verbal messages, make requests, state their name and age, tell personal narratives, etc. (Eisenberg, forthcoming). Being told to repeat so many different things may have made being told to Say thank-you less of a "special" occasion. Because repetition was less of a strange situation, children may even have been more likely to repeat. If imitation actually does aid in the learning of vocabulary items as many researchers have claimed (e.g., Corrigan, 1980; Moerk, 1977), then both more elicitation and more repetition of such forms should lead to early use. Hood and Schieffelin (1978) offer a similar explanation for why being asked to repeat was such a difficult task for a middle-class, English-speaking child, yet so simple for Kaluli children: repetition among the Kaluli was a naturally-occurring situation.

While sociocultural factors may help to explain why the children began using the forms so early, they still needed to make a number of analyses in order to determine when to use such forms spontaneously. The errors that they made in using them indicated that they were indeed attempting to extract out the situational attributes go-

verning their use. First, the children had clearly formed a "category" of such polite expressions. Any of the various formulas were seen as an appropriate response to the question ¿Cómo se dice?, "What do you say?" There were also frequent, spontaneous instances of misuse. Pepito often said thank-you after he sneezed and Gaby occasionally said por favor when someone gave her something. Thank-you and gracías, however, were the most commonly misused formulas, probably because they were usually the most appropriate response to the question ¿Cómo se dice?, "What do you say?"

Interestingly, some of the routines modeled were never confused with the large category of politeness formulas that included please, thank-you, bless you, excuse me, and sorry. Greetings were in a separate class, as were offers (e.g., ¿quiere?, "do you want?") and responses to vocatives (e.g., mande usted, "you command"). Yet all of these forms were also modeled in interactions with Díle, "say to him/her." Offers may have been distinct because the verb form ¿quiere?, "do you want?" was the one meaningful form for the children. That is, it was not just a politeness formula. Greetings and responses to vocatives, on the other hand, were responses to another speaker's greeting or summons, while the other formulas were responses to some situation. That is, greetings and mande usted were "cued" by a verbal behavior on the part of another person, while using thank-you or excuse me involved understanding a situation.

Children also made errors involving the situational constraints governing the use of politeness formulas. All of the children initially seemed to be missing the feature "other person" in their use of salud, "bless you." In fact, they said it after they had sneezed even more often than after someone else had sneezed. Similarly, Gaby said 'scuse me on occasion when someone else had burped. For Pepito, the critical feature governing the use of 'scuse me was a loud noise, and he would say it not only after burping, but also in response to air escaping from a balloon or the sound made as a rubber scraper rubbed against wet glass during window-cleaning.

The most interesting errors, however, occurred with Gabriela's use of por favor, "please." She first began using it correctly at 29 months as an accompaniment to some of her requests, for example, dáme otro, por favor, "give me another, please." In general, however, she used it when forced to repeat her initial request because the addressee had failed to comply. Often, her second try was simply por favor. By 32 months, she usually used por favor to mae a request without explicitly stating what she wanted. For example, she would hold out a toy and say por favor when she wanted someone to wind it up. It was almost as if por favor had become the critical element in any request. She also began using it whenever she was unhappy with some situation--e.g., when her mother was blowing her nose. By 34 months, it seemed to have become an emphatic; she punctuated many of her utterances with it, saying things like viene policia por

favor, "police is coming please," and threatening with tiene mi papi cinto por favor, "my Daddy has a belt please." Not until 36 months did she resume using por favor only to mitigate her requests.

Such errors indicate that children were indeed trying to determine the underlying structure of such forms. In fact, it would have been impossible for them to use them spontaneously at all if, as Gleason and Weintraub (1976a&b) suggested, they were performing without competence. Their competence may have been partial and they may not have understood why it might be necessary, for example, to say thank-you, but they were beginning to understand when to say it. They were certainly making analyses similar to those necessary for the use of what Gleason and Weintraub (1976a) call "much of the rest of language" (134). Their understanding of the common features of situations in which particular formulas were appropriate led to their ability to begin using them spontaneously.

In fact, as Ferguson (1976) suggests, the actual acquisition of politeness formulas is not initially significantly different from the acquisition of other unanalyzed units during language development. Children seem particularly sensitive to words that accompany salient situations. For example, just before the children began learning to say thank-you after receiving an object or sorry when they accidentally stepped on someone, they had learned to say bravo! after successfully assembling a puzzle or singing a song, ay voy, "I'm coming," when their name was called, and come on or córrale, "run, hurry up," as they hurried inside. The use of the few English phrases in their vocabularies further indicates that there were often instances when they knew what to say in a situation, but not exactly what it meant. Both Nancy and Pepito said le's go as they left a room or the house and by 34 months, Gaby had learned to say so what? to most of what her cousin Laura said. The children could also respond to the question ¿Dónde está tu papá?, "where's your Daddy?", with the complex sentences está trabajando, "he's working," and se fue a trabajar, "he went to work," long before they were using the words in those utterances in other contexts.

As Wells (1981) has suggested, the young child's environment is one in which speech is associated with many routine transactions that provide the basis for some of the earliest meaning structures. By the frequent repetition of words and phrases in specific patterns of activities, adults provide young children with information about which aspects of experience are important. They model the way significant meanings are given linguistic realization. Some of those meanings--e.g., bravo! and come on--will be incidental, dependent only on the forms of interaction that adults commonly engage in with young children. Others, such as politeness formulas, will be explicitly made salient because of cultural beliefs and practices concerning the appropriate behaviors for young children.

In conclusion, it would seem impossible to divide the social

uses of language and the referential use of language into two separate categories. While the exact rules for use and meaning that children have to discover may differ, the means by which they can make such analyses are probably the same.

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